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Bird Notes From Tacoma Gulches

BY J. H. BOWLES.

THIS form of bird study is among the most difficult of any I have ever attempted, and a few words of description may not come amiss. These gulches or ravines were undoubtedly caused by glacial action, are often several miles long, and all run into Puget Sound. They vary from 80 to 100 feet in depth, have small trout brooks running through them, and are filled with underbrush and debris of all descriptions. In many places the bottoms are well wooded with fir and cedar.

The difficulties of thoroughly searching such places may easily be imagined, but they fade rapidly before the abundance of bird life to be found. A sketch of a trip taken May 9, 1898, will give a fairly typical day. First to strike the oological eye were the high, perpendicular clay walls, with here and there the nesting holes of the Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*), and Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*), the former bird only digging a nest for itself when all burrows of the latter are tenanted. These nests are almost invariably inaccessible, as they vary in height from forty to seventy feet above one's reach.

While gazing at them with regretful longing, the stillness was suddenly broken by the beautiful, bell-like warble of the Western Winter Wren (*Anorthura*

hiemalis pacifica)—to my mind one of the most charming singers of the northwest. Then I knew my work was cut out, for within half a mile must be his nest, which, together with its contents, would make a most welcome addition to my collection. I walked to the edge of the brook and, after traveling a short distance along it, the way was blocked by a giant fir that, in falling years before, had split in the middle. From deep in this split appeared suspicious-looking twigs, but past experience had taught me not to expect the real nest within a hundred yards of a singing Winter Wren. Nor was I mistaken this time, for it proved to be nothing more than a well-built "decoy," about which the bird made a very natural "bluff" of anxiety.

The tree being fully six feet in diameter and covered with vegetation of all kinds, my climb over it was accomplished with considerable noise, and on sliding down on the other side I was promptly greeted with an angry buzz. It proved to come from a female Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*), and seldom have I seen such an atom of concentrated rage. A close inspection of the vicinity showed her to have good grounds for anger, as in my slide I had passed within a few inches of her nest with its set of two eggs. It was saddled

against a dead hanging twig in the midst of the tangle. After making a background of newspapers I took a photograph, cleared away my debris and retired to watch her. She had cooled down considerably and it was but a short time before she flew above her nest, hovered over it for a second or two and then dropped into it like a stone. This I have found to be the invariable custom of the Hummers when going to the nest, and as nests are frequently found having one or both eggs broken, this habit appears to me to be a very possible cause.

Leaving her with her treasures I continued up the brook, finding two more decoy nests of the wrens in the roots of fallen trees, a nest of Rusty Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia guttata*) with four well-grown young and another with four fresh eggs. A female Lutescent Warbler (*Helminthophila c. lutescens*) assured me that her nest was close by, but she would not go to it and I could not find it myself. Then I noticed a most interesting trick of Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*). These birds do not nest in the gulches, but fly down into them in search of what food they happen to come across and as much mischief as a most fertile ingenuity can bring about. I watched one of these for some time, my attention being attracted to him by his squabbling with a squirrel, probably over a nut from the latter's store. But right for once prevailed and the jay, with a burst of harsh, laughing notes, flew to the lower branches of a patriarchal cedar. After enjoying his last joke for a short while, he seemed to have had enough of the ravine and followed the jays' time-honored custom of getting out of it. Being much too lazy to fly, he hopped to the branch above him and continued leisurely upward in this manner until reaching the very top. This brought him above the level of the upper edge of the gulch, to which he flew in search of further sport.

This was some 200 yards from where

the wren was heard singing and I knew my chances of success in that direction should be reaching a focus. Consequently a half-uprooted fir tree some few yards further on, gave me a thrill of more than usual interest. The opening under the roots extended in about ten feet and was only three feet high at the entrance, so there was nothing for it but to imitate the serpent. The wren had left me long since and nothing stirred when I shook the roots, therefore my hopes were high, as these wrens are never seen near their eggs. After crawling in as far as possible, I turned over on my back and waited for my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. As things gradually took shape, almost the first thing I saw was the much hoped-for ball of twigs and green moss directly over my head. It was wedged in among the earth and roots, and a feather protruding from the entrance told me that my search had reached a satisfactory end—the decoy nests are never lined. The set consisted of six partially incubated eggs, and only one more decoy was found, this being a short distance further on in a long-neglected placer mine.

Upon coming to a slope in the side of the gulch I decided to climb out, and had barely started upward when another Rufous Hummer flushed from her nest on a drooping fir bough. As I merely stopped long enough to note the two eggs and construction of the nest, the bird returned to it at once. This she did in the same manner as the first one, and with quite as much apparent desire to utterly destroy the contents of the nest.

My last find was made shortly before arriving at the top, at a very steep and bare place where I could barely climb even with the aid of an impromptu alpine-stock. Almost out of reach was a dead fir stump about three feet high, and from force of habit I hit it with my stick. As if shot from a gun, a Vigor's Wren (*Thryomanes bewicki spilurus*) went straight up into the air about

thirty feet, and then darted into a small patch of brush near by. The nest was placed in a natural hollow in the stump and held six very handsome eggs. It was beautifully made, being composed of cedar bark with a lining of many different colored feathers. I was some time in taking this nest, for I removed the entire section of the stump in which it was placed, and the actions of the owners contrasted strongly with those of the Winter Wrens. The latter, as usual, never gave any sign that they were alive, but both male and female Vigor's Wrens protested for all their name implied. Their note was a harsh deep "chuck," far louder than I should ever credited to so small a bird.

But the male decided it was not worth so much trouble, and soon flew to the top of a bush where he sang until I left. Again I was surprised at the volume of sound, the note resembling that of *Anorthura h. pacifica* in a general way, but being many times louder and greatly lacking in delicacy of fiber. I listened for a full quarter hour, as he made very short intervals between songs, and then turned homeward, having completed one of my favorite trips among the birds.



Chipmunks.

The observations of Mr. Williams at Independence Lake as recorded in the Sept.-October CONDOR were a surprise to me, as I had never suspected the chipmunks of harming birds, nor did I think they were carnivorous, though I had been told that the larger one, Say's Chipmunk, would sometimes kill and eat the Large-eared Chipmunk, but having seen many cages of pets which contained both species dwelling together in peace, I doubted the carnivorous propensity of *T. sayi*. These are the species which are found at Independence Lake.

Scarcity of food may have been the cause of their exceptional (?) behavior at Independence Lake which, like other

damp localities in the Sierras, at 7000 feet altitude, or approximately that, is subject to frequent summer frosts. The past summer was an unfruitful one in these mountains from about 6,500 feet upward. The sunflower, gooseberries, seeds of the lupines, acorn of the dwarf oak, in fact all seeds and berries, with slight exception, were destroyed by frost before they matured.

Birds are unaccountably scarce in the timber belt of the Sierras and also in most of the agricultural districts of California. My belief has been that birds which nest on the ground oftener succeed in rearing their young than those which build in bushes and trees. I have seen at least a hundred nests of the junco and can only remember one that was disturbed by bird or animal, the exception being a nest that contained four young which were killed by a gopher snake. The majority of these nests were between 4,000 and 5,000 feet altitude and were built in the forest where the smaller chipmunk is abundant, but below the range of Say's Chipmunk.

I think the tree squirrels (*S. fessor* and *S. hudsonius fremonti*), the former the large Grey Squirrel and the latter the Red Squirrel, destroy a great many nests and eggs in some localities. I hope the causes of bird scarcity in California will be ascertained and removed if possible. I think some are climatic.

L. BELDING.

Stockton, Cal.



Mr. William W. Price will conduct a party of boys and young men on a natural history and exploring trip to the Lower Colorado River from Yuma, Ariz., southward through Mexico to the Gulf of California. The party left Yuma Dec. 21 and are expected to return about Jan. 5. It is safe to assume that, with Mr. Price as their leader and guide, they will find the outing both profitable and immensely interesting.

We learn that W. Otto Emerson of Hayward, Cal., has been appointed a member of the A. O. U. Committee on Bird Protection for California. Mr. Emerson's active work in this line is well known, and the appointment is happily deserved.